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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an overview of the philosophy, psychology of learning, teaching methods, and curriculum of the Waldorf Schools. Most Waldorf teachers are influenced by the esoteric form of critical idealism propounded by Rudolf Steiner. The child is considered by Steiner to be a spiritual being who has reincarnated on to earth in a physical body. The teacher's responsibility is to liberate the spirit of the child for later service to humanity. The physical, etheric (energy), astral (soul) and ego aspects of a human being determine the subjects taught in the curriculum, their sequence and methods of presentation. Waldorf teachers use a kinesthetic, action-loaded approach which involves the child first in impulse expression, then emotion, and then in knowledge and skill development. Other features of the Waldorf approach are (1) continuous teachers: the class teacher stays with the class through the elementary grades, (2) main lessons: two hours each day are given to one subject at the beginning of each day for three weeks or longer, (3) no text books, (4) languages: children from the first grade on learn two foreign languages by the oral method, and (5) comprehensive and sequenced curriculum: subjects are arranged to follow Steiner's idea of the evolution of the development of man's consciousness. (Author/RH)

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WALDORF SCHOOLS: A CHILD-CENTERED SYSTEM

by

Earl J. Ogletree

The Waldorf Schools, sometimes known by their founder's name Rudolf Steiner, are relatively unknown to American educators and parents. Rudolf Steiner(1861-1925), and his followers after establishing the first Waldorf School in Stuttgart, Germany in 1919, the movement has grown to 150 schools in 18 countries, including 14 in the United States.

The Waldorf Schools are as different from other schools as they are unknown. Let us explore these differences and the tenets of the educational system.

Philosophy:

The philosophical foundation of Waldorf education is based on Steiner's anthroposophy (wisdom of man) -- an esoteric form of critical idealism. Included in this anthroposophical philosophy is the meaning life, life before birth and after death, principles of reincarnation, karma and the spirituality of man. Although Steiner's anthroposophy is not taught to Waldorf School students or to parents (many parents are not even aware of its basic philosophical tenets, except that the school is nondenominationally Christian), the curriculum and methodology are influenced by it. Most Waldorf teachers are by necessity anthroposophists. Out of it flows how the teacher views life, herself, the children and how she implements

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the curriculum.

Psychology of learning:

The child, as indicated, is considered to be a spiritual being (of course, as is the teacher and everyone else), who has reincarnated on to earth in a physical body, bringing with him certain inherent talents and capacities, etc. These are to be nurtured and drawn out by the teacher, wrung out, as it were. She is to liberate the spiritual essence of the child, to remove all obstacles and hinderances, to make possible the full development the childs' talents for later service in behalf of humanity.[1]

Out of Steiner's anthroposophical view of the human being came distinct developmental stages in which the child's motor, affective and intellectual powers or capacities unfold. It is somewhat similar to the "unfoldment" theory of child development and to Piaget's theory of stages of cognition, except Steiner's concept deals with the whole child, not just the intellect.

However, there is an additional aspect to Steiner's psychology that is essential to understanding Waldorf education and why it is different, but can only be allude to here for the lack of space. His esoteric psychology includes a four-fold concept of man--physical body, etheric (bioplasmic energy), astral body (soul or personality),and ego.[2] The etheric body

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1. Some of the information taken from Some Aspects of a Rudolf Steiner Education, issued by the Rudolf Steiner Educational Association, Scotland, 1973.

2. Steiner, Rudolf, Study of Man, London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1966.

or energy force *, in particular, that propogates physical growth, regenerates cells, maintains health and is the basis of cognition, together with the other three entitles, determine both the subjects in the curriculum and their time and methods of presentation. Steiner has laid down a curriculum, that purports to compatibly support these inner processes.[3] (See bibliography for additional information).

Teaching Methods:

The Waldorf Schools (kindergarten through twelfth grade), are basically humanistic, approaching the child as a developing growth-readiness being.

Waldorf teachers at the elementary level use a kinesthetic, action-loaded approach to intellectual subjects which involves the child first in the realm of impulse and doing, then emotion, and then gradually leads over to knowledge and skill. Young children have primarily an imaginative consciousness and their thinking takes place in pictorial, mental representations, and they learn best by doing. For this reason every effort is made to present the subject matter motorically and artistically. In this sense art is not an isolated subject but is a pervasive media which gives meaning to every subject and promotes intrinsic motivation.[4] Intellectualism is "out", art,

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3. Steiner, Rudolf, Discussion with Teachers, London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1967.

4. Harwood, A.C., The Recovery of Man in Childhood, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1963, p. 9.

* See: Ogletree, Earl, "Cognitive Development in children and Bioplasmic Forces," Phi Delta Kappan, Vol. LV, No. 6, February, 1974, pp. 407-414.

music and rhythm---emotional, active based learning are "in." The child's life of motor and "will" activity and feelings is seen as being of primary importance in developing the energy forces that become the basis of cognition.[5]

Continuous Teachers:

A significant feature of the Waldorf approach is the pupil-teacher relationship. The class teacher, who takes over the class in first grade, follows the class throughout the elementary grades. This not only gives him the opportunity to form a personal relationship with each pupil in the order of a "third parent ", but makes him personally responsible for the academic achievement and progress of each pupil. However, the class teacher is not the only teacher with whom the class comes into contact. Special subjects, such as music, foreign languages, physical education, are often taught by specialists.

Main lesson:

Another special feature of the Waldorf School program is the "main lesson". This name has been given to a period of study which takes place at the beginning of each day for two hours. It is devoted to one subject for three weeks or longer. Typical main lesson subjects are mathematics, language arts, social studies, and science. The main lesson allows the pupil to give his undivided attention to each subject in succession.

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5. Steiner, Rudolf, Education and Modern Spiritual Life, 12 lectures given by Rudolf Steiner at Ilkley, Yorkshire, August 5, August 17, 1923, London: Anthroposophical Publishing Company, 1943.

He lives with his studies more intensively. The brighter pupil deepens his interest and is stimulated to intensified creative work. The slower student, whose interest may be hardly touched in 50 minute periods, has time to develop his interest in the subject and to effectively deal with it.

Balanced day:

The activities of the school day are balanced in relation to the child's attention span and activeness. The main lesson includes the teaching of the more intellectual subjects in the first periods of the day, when the children are restful and concentrated. The artistic subjects are taught in the late morning and early afternoon, e.g., art, crafts, music, etc., and the more active subjects, e.g., gynmastics, physical education, industrial arts, etc. are taught at the end of the school day, when the children are more restless and less attentive.

No textbooks:

The children write and illustrate in color their own materials, which are used in place of texts, on each main lesson, throughout their schooling.

Languages:

Children from the first grade on learn two foreign languages by means of the oral method. They simply hear and imitate in a natural manner. Translating from English, for example, to German and visa-versa is avoided. Daily recitation speech exercises, poetry, tongue-twisters enhance childrens feeling for languages and develop clean enunciation.

Sequenced curriculum:

Subjects are arranged in sequence so that they are compatible with the child's psychological and cognitive development. The reading program includes a sequence of literature that is not only supposed to be compatible with the child's mode of thinking and feeling at each grade level, but follows, according to Steiner the evolution of the development of man's consciousness.[6] ...For example, fairy tales are taught in the first grade, animal stores and fables in the second, Old Testament in the third grade; Norse and Greek mythology and legends in the fourth and fifth grade, history of middle ages in the sixth grade; history of exploration in the seventh grade, and history to the present time in the eighth grade.

Geometry program:

Geometry is taught in terms of forms or free-hand drawing in the first five grades, then at the sixth grade geometric figures and design are constructed, using compass, protractor and ruler. The idea is that the child experiences the subject through emotional (artistic), and motor involvement prior to its intellectualization. A child will understand a subject better if he first experiences it, rather then attempting to understand it before having any experience with it.[7]

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6. Steiner, Rudolf, Essentials of Education, (trans, Jesse Darrell), London: Anthroposophical Publishing Co., 1948.

7. Steiner, Rudolf, Practical Course for Teachers, London: The Rudolf Steiner Publishing Company, 1937.

Handwork:

Both boys and girls do knitting, sewing chrochetting, clay modelling, and shop work, beginning in the first grade.

Eurythmy:

Every child does Eurythmy--an art of movement of the body and, in particular, the arms that expresses in movement the vowels and consonants of speech and the tones of music. Eurythmy is visible speech. It is used extensively to teach reading, speech and music to harmonize motor and perceptual development. It is supposed to have a healthy effect upon the children by strengthening the etheric or energy forces, mentioned earlier.

Comprehensive curriculum:

In addition a full syllabus of the usual subjects of English, history, geography, mathematics, science and gymnastics, drawing, painting, music, speech training are taught throughout the first eight grades. Latin, Greek, natural history, physiology, wood carving are taught in the middle grades and the History of Art to the older children. Waldorf teachers feel that by delaying the teaching of a subject until the child is motivationally ready, they economize teaching time, thereby permitting a broader curriculum. There are many other aspects of the program that could be mentioned, the limitation of space prevents this. Instead the writer refers the reader to the bibliography included in the article for more indepth and comprehensive information on the Waldorf School.

The goal of Waldorf education is to allow the child to

reach his fullest potential by drawing out and developing his inherent talents and capacities, and even those he doesn't possess.

This is accomplished by means of the compatible methodology, timing the introduction of subjects and a broad curriculum in which every child can find success. Huebner in evaluating the Waldorf curriculum stated:

> In view of the fact that the potentialities and talents of children vary greatly, the Waldorf curriculum is unusually rich. In addition to the regular subjects there are gardening, surveying, mechanics, bookbinding, weaving, spinning, etc. With such a variety of offerings, every child will find something of interest and something in which he may excel. The generally accepted distinction between gifted and nongifted thus tends to disappear. Every normal human being is gifted in some area.[8]

What appears to be so unique about the Waldorf School is that its educational practices closely embodies its philosophical goals and psychological theories, "in which the part reflects the organic whole."[9] To understand one aspect of Waldorf education, it is necessary to understand the whole.

The task here was not to explicate the whole Waldorf education, but to give the reader a taste of its rather innovative and complex nature. It is a method of education that is neither easily understood nor one that could be easily adopted by the public schools. On the other hand, in these days of educational liberalism and innovativeness, it does deserve further study.

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8. Huebner, Theodore, "The Rudolf Steiner Schools," The American-German Review, February 1972, p.2.

9. Harwood, op.cit.

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